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Alfred López

OF HOME AND REMEMBRANCE:
TWO RECENT WORKS OF
CUBAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE

IT IS A TRUISM that Latino/a writers are obsessed with the past; from the first blossoming of Chicano literature in the 30s and 40s with the fiction of Américo Paredes, to the more recent crop of memory-laden works by Julia Alvarez and Pulitzer winner Oscar Hijuelos, Latino/as have often shown a penchant for reminiscence. Much recent Cuban-American literature especially bears this mark of memory, this compulsion to reconstruct worlds within what Harold Augenbraum and Ilan Stavans have dubbed “an air of nostalgia.” And indeed, two of the newest additions to the Cuban-American canon (for those of us who believe in such things) exhibit just such a predilection for the past: Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s *Next Year in Cuba*, a moving, lyrical memoir of the author’s exile from Cuba as a child and his experiences growing up in the U.S.; and *The Secret of the Bulls*, the debut novel by José Raúl Bernardo, a powerful and intensely earthy rendering of one Cuban family’s joys and struggles in pre-Fidel (and pre-Batista) Cuba.

At first glance these titles would seem to have little in common beyond the ethnicity of their authors and their common good fortune at having attracted the attention of major publishers; they do not share an interest in a particular historical period, a writing style, or even a genre (although generic distinctions become increasingly irrelevant as one reads the texts). What they *do* share, however, is a desire to *remember*, to reconstruct a heritage and a history from the fragments left them by experiences of loss and exile. Far from constituting mere chronicles of (and longing for) the “good old days” of pre-Castro Cuba, that is, far from being satisfied with nostalgia, these are works that seek to examine a turbulent

Next Year in Cuba: A Cubano's Coming-of-Age in America by Gustavo Pérez Firmat. New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1995.

The Secret of the Bulls by José Raúl Bernardo. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

history and to ponder its meanings and lessons. *Next Year in Cuba* offers Pérez Firmat's reflections on the perils of balancing his Cuban roots and the very different culture of his adopted country, while *The Secret of the Bulls* examines, through the exploits of one remarkable family, the wealth of Cuban culture and the turbulence of Cuban history.

Oh, and there is one more quality common to these newest works of Cuban-American literature: they are both fine reads, Pérez Firmat's book as thoughtful and reflective as Bernardo's is dramatic and potent. Both are welcome additions to a burgeoning body of work that is beginning to rival Chicano/a literature in its quality and scope.

Perhaps the most striking of the characteristics shared by these texts is their blending of the personal—or more precisely the *familial*—and the broadly historical. Pérez Firmat's story routinely intertwines personal recollection and family chronicle with national histories, to the point where the different strands of his narrative become nearly indistinguishable. Such narrative effects may be expected from a literature that is, after all, defined by exile. There are Cuban-American literatures because there are Cuban Americans, and although we cannot reduce an entire body of literary work to the experience of exile, it is certainly the historical fact of the Cuban Revolution and the subsequent exodus of millions of Cubans to the United States that drives much of the Cuban-American canon. Not for nothing, then, is Pérez Firmat's book subtitled "A *Cubano's* Coming-of-Age in America." Consider, for example, this remarkable passage:

I have replayed our departure from Cuba in my mind hundreds, perhaps thousands, of times. I have dreamed about it, fantasized about it, and matched memories with my parents and with my brother Pepe, who was old enough to remember. In my night and day dreams, I visualize the departure exactly as I have described it, with one difference. As the ferry lurches away from the pier, I look back and see a small boy waving good-bye to me. He's my age, or perhaps a year or two younger, dressed as I would have been dressed—a pullover with horizontal stripes and short pants almost down to his knees. You can't see his socks because he's wearing cowboy boots. His hair is cut in

malanga fashion, with the whole head clipped very short except for a tuft of hair in the front, kept stiffly in place by a generous helping of *gomina*, a gooey hair grease (American Vaseline is to Cuban *gomina* as Johnson's baby oil is to Slick 50). The boy is what in Spanish you'd call *un niño de su casa*, which doesn't quite translate as a homeboy, since this kid is more homebody than homeboy.

I realize that this boy on the dock is me. Somehow, in my dream, I'm in two places at once. . . . The last image in my dream is of me on the ferry, with my hands gripping the deck railing and my head barely above it, looking toward the shore and seeing the Cuban boy I was, the Cuban boy I am no longer, fade to a point and then to nothing. Finally, the only kid is the one on the ferry, which has sailed out into the open sea.

(20-1)

I find this passage exceptional not only for its lovingly wistful portrayal of the boy ("the Cuban boy I was") or its articulation of a subject irremediably fractured by exile ("the Cuban boy I am no longer"), but for the subtle way in which the narrative negotiates between the historical event and the individual's experience of it—between, as it were, the memory of a Cuban childhood and the long shadow cast upon it by the Castro Revolution.

From here, Pérez Firmat proceeds to weave his web of personal, familial, and national narratives with the skill of a novelist. Indeed, the book assumes the feel of a *bildungsroman*, as Pérez Firmat leads us from recollections of a childhood spent in Havana to the joys and trials of life in Miami's "Little Havana," through graduate school to his present position as Professor of Spanish at Duke University. The author himself describes his story as "a picaresque tale, a rogue's progress," and at its best his tale of paradise lost (and to the extent that he finally embraces American culture, found) reads as less a memoir than as a novel, whose central asset is a narrative voice as thoughtful and engaging as any in the Cuban-American canon. That the narrative occasionally slips into moments of self-pity or bitterness (the nostalgia-laden mourning of the passage of the Cuban holiday *Nochebuena* and description of the author's

colleagues at Duke are good examples) serves only to emphasize the turbulence that lies just beneath this book's lyrical surface. Above all, *Next Year in Cuba* is a beautifully-narrated yet unflinching examination of a subject fractured by exile, who has nonetheless found a measure of peace in the tentative but sincere embracing of his adopted land.

If Pérez Firmat's memoir of exile finds its strength in a novelistic narrative style and sense of a larger historical context, Bernardo's ostensibly historical novel is everywhere marked by its awareness of the historical *as* the personal. We can already see this in two brief passages from the novel's opening chapter:

A few years after Columbus discovered the Americas on his way to India, the city of La Havana was founded on the south shore of Cuba, in a location very close to Batabanó, the little village where Dolores and Maximiliano first met. But in 1519, when a great bay was discovered on the north shore just a few miles away, the city moved, name and all. This was the same year Dolores's ancestors first arrived in Cuba. (12)

It takes Dolores a long, long week after her eyes first met those of the blond young man to find out that his name is Maximiliano; that he comes from a family of Germans who arrived in Cuba in the late 1860s, when Mexico was part of the German empire; that he is named after the German emperor of Mexico; that he is the butcher's son; and that he works at his father's butcher shop. (13)

It is this systematic intertwining of the historical and the personal—the ease, that is, with which the historical *becomes* the personal—that gives the novel its powerful sense of place and makes its characters so compelling. The novel abounds with such moments: the narration of metropolitan La Havana as first experienced by the country-green Maximiliano and his son Mani; the characters' arduous journey to La Havana, and the expressions of joy and fascination that accompany their first distant glimpses of the city ("the people in the front seats gasp an almost inaudible

‘Aahhh . . . ’”(62); the Great Depression in the U.S. and its “ripple effect” on the lives of Cubans; and so on. Even the subtitles for the novel’s various parts (“Guajiros 1911-1926” or “Weddings 1936-1938”) illustrate the text’s deftly balanced focus on national history and family chronicle. If Pérez Firmat’s memoir reads like a novel, Bernardo’s is a novel that doubles as an anecdotal history of a nation and its people.

For all their parallels and shared interests, there are also marked differences between the texts. For one, Bernardo’s novel, with its sense of national history and carefully crafted portrayals of pre-republican Cuba, is less outwardly polemical than Pérez Firmat’s book, with its unrelenting anti-Castro stance (which, given the trials and sufferings of his family as a result of the Revolution, is understandable). *Next Year in Cuba* is also more intensely self-reflexive and self-confrontational than Bernardo’s novel, partially because of its first-person narration but also because of the profound schism that defines its subject matter. For while both books may be written by Cuban exiles, Pérez Firmat’s is precisely *about* that exile and its effects on the lives of those who suffer it. If *The Secret of the Bulls* is awash with family crises (poverty, the effects of classism and sexism on the family) and natural catastrophies (two hurricanes, migration to the city, a devastating fire), Pérez Firmat’s narrative stakes out a single historical event—the Cuban Revolution—as a defining moment in the lives of the author, his family, and millions of other Cubans who fled to the U.S.

It is instructive in this regard that Mani, the character whose coming-of-age story *The Bulls* partially is, achieves at the end of the novel a sort of emancipation from the various dilemmas (personal and cultural) with which he has struggled, while *Next Year’s* conclusion finds Pérez Firmat still entangled within his own contradictions, paralyzed by the prospect of voting in a local election—an act which to him represents a definitive and irreversible step away from the land and culture of his birth. Perhaps, finally, this is the crucial and defining distinction to be made between these remarkable Cuban-American texts: that Bernardo’s novel asserts the possibility of a freedom *from* the blows of history, while for Pérez Firmat there is only the hard-fought wisdom that comes from pain, that allows him to live, however ambivalently, with the ghosts of the past.